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ABSTRACT

This report presents articles that explore the changing role of the states in addressing the nation's need to build and modernize its public schools. The article, "Doling Out Facilities Aid Proves Tricky," explains how some states have learned that securing funds is only one part of helping districts pay for construction. "Some States Help Charter Schools Put a Roof Overhead" discusses charter school facility funding. "Town and Country" explores why urban and rural communities are going to court in search of more help from their states in constructing and upgrading schools. "Out in the Cold" discusses how Alaskan state leaders have been court ordered to improve the condition of schools in the state's far-flung rural villages. "Urban Renewal" examines how, after a lengthy court battle, New Jersey's cities are on the brink of receiving a multibillion-dollar infusion of state aid to improve their school buildings. "Capitol Expenditures" shows how more states are abandoning their traditionally hands-off approach to helping districts build and upgrade schools because of litigation over inequities, increasing enrollments, and evolving educational demands. Finally, "Side-by-Side States Are Far Apart in Funding for Facilities" discusses Washington state's leading role in helping fund school construction and renovation while Idaho leaves these issues for the school districts to handle. (GR)

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June 2001

Building A New Role: States and School Facilities

ED 454 692

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This three-part special report examines the changing role of the states in addressing the nation's need to build and modernize its public schools.

Doling Out Facilities Aid Proves Tricky, June 20, 2001.
Some states have learned through trial by fire that securing funds is only one part of helping districts pay for construction. They also have to figure out how best to distribute it.

- **Some States Help Charter Schools Put a Roof Overhead**
  With a proposed federal program for charter facilities in the works and recent steps to address charter schools' building needs in Ohio, Colorado, and Indiana, there appears to be a growing awareness to tackle one of the biggest problems faced by most charter schools: funding facilities.

Town and Country, June 13, 2001.
Urban and rural communities across the country have gone to court in search of more help from their states in constructing and upgrading schools. A look at schools in Alaska and New Jersey shows why. Includes:

- **Out in the Cold**
  State leaders in Alaska are under court order to improve the condition of school in the state's far-flung rural villages.
- **Urban Renewal**
  In the aftermath of a lengthy legal battle, New Jersey's cities are on the brink of receiving a multibillion-dollar infusion of state aid to bring their school buildings up to snuff.

Capitol Expenditures, June 6, 2001.
More states are abandoning their traditionally hands-off approach to helping districts build and upgrade schools. The factors driving that change include litigation over inequities, burgeoning enrollments, and evolving educational demands. Includes:

- **Side-by-Side States Are Far Apart in Funding for Facilities**
  Washington state has long taken a leading role in helping pick up the tab for building and fixing up schools. In Idaho, however, districts are pretty much on their own.

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Education Week

American Education's Newspaper of Record

June 20, 2001

Doling Out Facilities Aid Proves Tricky

By Jessica L. Sandham
Education Week

In the three years since California voters authorized a bond issue providing $6.7 billion to help ease school crowding, state policymakers have been saddled with a classic imbalance of supply and demand. It's as if they're trying to feed dozens of people with a single loaf of bread: No matter how they slice it, people still end up hungry.

A coalition of Los Angeles students and community groups filed suit in March of last year, charging that the state's original method of giving out school construction money was rigged against city districts. The suit contended that because urban districts like Los Angeles need more time to secure school sites, distributing money on a first-come, first-served basis cheated them of their fair share.

A state trial court judge agreed, and last fall, the state agency responsible for overseeing the school construction program changed the system to favor districts with the greatest facilities needs. Now, many of the growing suburban districts bumped to the back of the line because of the state's midcourse shift are fighting back: In November, a coalition of such districts filed their own suit challenging the new rules.

California is one of a growing number of states that have been compelled by litigation, school crowding, or the overwhelming need to replace inadequate facilities to play a greater role in helping districts build or renovate schools. In so doing, some states have learned through trial by fire that securing the money is only one part of the equation in helping districts pay for construction. Then, the states have to figure out how best to give it out.

States have come up with many different ways to do that, from providing a limited amount of earmarked per-pupil funding to all districts, to offering help with debt service, to reimbursing districts for construction costs on a sliding scale based on need.

"Different states take different things into consideration, whether it's actual need, growth, or poverty in the area," said Joe Agron, the editor in chief of *American School and University Magazine*, which tracks school construction trends.

Yet despite that diversity, many states have struck a similar stumbling block as they've become more active in helping districts fix their facilities problems: Whatever they do seems to leave someone unhappy. However evenhanded policymakers try to be, complaints have abounded that the systems they have devised for distributing construction aid are unfair.

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"We are very dependent on the state because those are the rules they've set up," said Deborah Bettencourt, the deputy superintendent of the 16,000-student Folsom-Cordova Unified School District, one of the California school systems fighting the state's recent change in the way it distributes bond money. "They're trying to please everyone, and they're pleasing no one."

Adjusting for Wealth

As they struggle to reconcile competing claims for state dollars to help meet school building needs, many states have moved in recent years toward formulas that provide a greater amount of aid to those districts that are less able to pay for schools on their own. In the 1998- 99 school year, 22 states were using some type of such an "equalized" method for handing out their school construction funds, sometimes in combination with other programs, according to the December 2000 issue of the journal *School Business Affairs*.

The adoption of equalized approaches to construction funding has been in part driven by finance-equity lawsuits that incorporate facilities, including those in such states as Arizona, New Jersey, and Ohio.

In theory, it means that "you're putting money into the high-need areas where most of the at-risk students are," said Thomas A. Kube, the executive director of the Council of Educational Facility Planners, based in Scottsdale, Ariz. "Affluent districts either have to take care of their own needs or wait their turn."

Ohio lawmakers opted for an equalized-funding approach four years ago when they established the state's first school facilities commission. By the time the commission set up shop in Columbus in 1997, the shoddy condition of many of the Buckeye State's school buildings had been well documented in a long-running lawsuit that challenged the state's overwhelming reliance on local property taxes to pay for schools' facilities and basic operating expenses.

Those conditions had received national notoriety, too: A 1996 survey by the U.S. General Accounting Office found that Ohio students were more likely to attend unsafe or inadequate schools than those in any other state.

The state has responded by pumping $2.7 billion into school facilities since 1997, an expenditure that one school official estimates is more than triple the amount the state had directed to such purposes over the preceding 100 years.

The bulk of the money has been allocated through a formula that ranks districts on a list according to their local property wealth per pupil. Districts with the least property wealth are given priority, while those at the other extreme understand that they may never see a dime from the state.

So far, at least 116 of the Ohio's 612 school districts have received help from the state.

The 1,650-student Minford district in southern Ohio is one school system that has unequivocally benefited from the state's largess. A small, rural district with little to speak of in the way of property wealth, Minford was one of the first districts on the facilities commission's priority list.

After assessing the district's needs, state officials agreed to spend $33 million to help build Minford a new high school and a new middle school, and to renovate the district's elementary school. Local taxpayers, for their part, were required to spend only $2.2 million.

Students have already moved out of the old high school, which was constructed in 1970 with a foundation so weak that soon after the school was completed, a hump appeared in a floor in the bottom story of the building because of soil shifting underneath. With cracks also forming on the interior of the building, Superintendent Dennis J. Meade called in a structural engineer every three months to ensure that the building was safe for habitation.

The middle school and elementary school projects will be completed by 2003. Even with a huge increase in the local mill rate, the district would not have been able to afford a construction project of such magnitude, Mr. Meade said.

"Our people had been supportive and had passed levies for repairs, but there was only so much we could do," he said. "We could have passed 100 mills and not come close to raising this kind of money."

With all three of its school buildings tended to by the state, Minford received what one state official calls a "full district fix." Rather than spreading state money out to a greater number of districts by helping districts one building at a time, state officials have opted instead to try to address all the facilities needs in each district as they work their way up the priority list.

"It causes us to go through districts more slowly and more methodically," said Rick Savors, the spokesman for the Ohio School Facilities Commission. "And we're not hitting districts with $10 million here or $15 million there. But it's our belief that you better take care of everything and then move on to the next district."

But that approach also means wealthier districts with pressing facilities needs are unlikely to receive state money any time soon.

Ranked as No. 416 out of 611 districts on the state's priority list in 1998, the South-Western City School District near Columbus decided it could not afford to wait years before receiving state aid. Instead, the 19,000- student district asked local taxpayers to pass a $128 million bond to build seven new schools and alleviate crowding in a district that was over capacity by 3,200 students.

The district had made three failed attempts to pass a bond in as many years and had begun taking desperate measures to house students: converting janitors' closets and greenhouses into classrooms, turning to split schedules at some schools, leasing vacant bank space to house kindergarten classes.

The bond passed in November 1998, and the district has begun its construction push. Still, as district officials look ahead to years of debt, they can't help feeling slighted. After all, their taxpayers will be paying the whole tab, while the state pours money into other districts.

"We don't want to be whiners, but it's certainly very disheartening," said Jeffrey B. Warner, a district spokesman, noting that the average family income in the community is roughly $30,000 a year. "When you look at the growth of our district and our demographic

position," he said, "it would seem reasonable that South-West schools would have qualified" for state aid.

Counting the 'Unhoused'

A rapidly expanding district such as South-Western would likely fare better in California, where the state has earmarked $2.9 billion for new construction in growing school districts, out of the $6.7 billion in bond money approved in 1998. Other funds were devoted to school modernization and class-size-reduction programs, and to fulfilling the various facilities needs of districts unable to obtain sufficient local funding.

In determining which districts should qualify for state aid for new school construction, California factors in the number of "unhoused" students in each district—that is, students the district projects it will receive in future years, those accommodated through split or multitrack school schedules, or those in portable classrooms.

Under the state's original requirements for its bond-funded construction program, districts qualified for the state money if they had any unhoused students and enough local matching dollars in hand to build a new school. Once those requirements were met, districts had to secure land, verify that it was environmentally sound, and receive approval for construction plans through a state architect before they could line up for state aid. The state would then distribute funds for all qualified projects on a first-come, first- served basis.

By the time the state was about halfway through its pot of money approved through the 1998 bond election, community members in Los Angeles realized that the district would likely receive only $50 million in new construction aid from the state—even though the 723,000-student district was eligible for $1 billion based on its number of unhoused students. The district had the local funds in hand to provide a match, and it clearly had demonstrated a need, but it couldn't move fast enough.

"What you had was a race for the funds, and the race went to the swiftest," said Hector O. Villagra, a staff lawyer with the Los Angeles office of the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, one of a coalition of community groups and students that challenged in court the state's method of distributing bond money. "It turns out the swiftest were districts that were higher income and had more Anglo students than districts that were losing out."

Urban districts such as Los Angeles were behind the curve, Mr. Villagra said, because without much available land, it simply took them longer to locate, secure, and clean up appropriate school sites, while suburban districts could often zero in on never- developed space in open fields.

And after the district's recent debacle with the Belmont Learning Center, a $175 million high school built on land polluted with toxic chemicals, Los Angeles officials have to be especially cautious "in having everyone cross all the t's and dot all the i's in making sure there are no environmental issues on their sites," Mr. Villagra said.

A state trial court judge ruled in favor of the Los Angeles coalition last August, and since then the state has shifted its method of distributing new construction funds. Each district is assigned "priority points" based on its number of unhoused students, and the state distributes roughly $120 million on a quarterly basis to districts with the most points. If all

goes according to plan, Los Angeles now expects to receive $450 million in new construction aid from the state before the money runs out.

High and Dry

But while Los Angeles stands to benefit from the new distribution method, the sudden shift to priority points has wreaked havoc in other districts that were, in some cases, ready to break ground on construction projects before the state changed course.

In Ms. Bettencourt's district of Folsom-Cordova, for example, officials had already signed a contract for the construction of an $11 million elementary school when the state shifted gears. Folsom-Cordova officials had expected to receive $5.25 million from the state under its previous guidelines, but were left in the lurch when they learned that they now did not have enough priority points to garner state funds.

Under contract to build the school, the district cobbled together developers' fees—including those slated for constructing an elementary school in another subdivision—and green-lighted the project without money from the state.

Still, the change has jeopardized construction of the next elementary school, Ms. Bettencourt said. "It's L.A. versus everybody else," she said. "Their shortsightedness should not be our problem. I know there are limited funds to go around, but those of us who did our planning were dependent on those state dollars."

An advocacy group known as the Coalition for Adequate School Housing, along with some individual school systems and the state's Small School Districts Association, filed a lawsuit last November challenging the state's new way of disbursing funds. Even as the lawsuit is still pending in state court, however, education officials on both sides of the legal battle agree that the dispute won't be resolved satisfactorily without more state aid.

"We can argue over these turf issues, and argue that priority points is not the way to go," said Jim Murdoch, a lobbyist for the Sacramento-based Coalition for Adequate School Housing. "The bottom line is California's huge need for school construction. The real issue is our desperate need for another big bond."

To that end, the state Assembly, the legislature's lower house, approved a measure earlier this month to put a $10 billion bond proposal for school facilities before California voters next year.

In shaping the distribution of future bond issues, policymakers would be wise to "acknowledge that there are differences between urban and rural and suburban areas in terms of processing speed," said Jim Bush, the assistant director for facilities in the California education department. "Perhaps there should be money reserved for different categories."

S.C. Splits Pie

South Carolina lawmakers were mindful of districts' varying facilities needs two years ago when they fashioned a formula for dividing the money from a $750 million bond issue approved by taxpayers for school construction.

Based on an approach devised several years earlier, when the state began devoting money from fees generated by a nuclear-waste plant to help districts offset facilities costs, state officials decided to split the money into several different pots.

A total of 35 percent, or roughly $262 million, was set aside to be given to districts on a per-pupil basis; another 35 percent was earmarked for distribution based on local property wealth; 15 percent was designated for offsetting debt-service costs in districts that had recently undertaken construction projects; and 15 percent was set aside for allocation based on districts' actual facilities needs.

"This was basically done because with all the different characteristics of school districts, everyone wanted to make sure that everybody got a fair piece of the pie," said Elmer Whitten, South Carolina's deputy superintendent for finance.

But while all South Carolina districts have benefited to some extent from the state aid, some small rural districts still struggle to cobble enough money together to address their facilities needs.

Orangeburg District 3 in rural Holly Hill, for example, received roughly $5.9 million from the state for construction of a new high school and elementary school. But taxpayers in that impoverished district, where 90 percent of students receive free or reduced-price lunches, were left with a $34 million tab.

Superintendent David Longshore Jr. said that if more state facilities aid were allocated in the same manner as state operations aid— under a sliding-scale formula based on district wealth—local taxpayers wouldn't need to assume so great a tax burden.

"It is a tremendous strain on the taxpayers in my district to do this," Mr. Longshore said.

Ultimately, South Carolina districts, like those in many other states, simply need the state to do more to help with facilities costs, said Robert E. Scarborough, the executive director of the South Carolina Association of School Administrators.

"You can't get very far in this conversation until you talk about the fact that $750 million doesn't even cover half of the total needs we have," Mr. Scarborough said. "At the time that money was approved, our school facilities were in a crisis. And in some places, they still are."

On the Web

The State Allocation Board in California is "responsible for determining the allocation of state resources used for the new construction and modernization of local public school facilities."

Also, read the current school facility program regulations, April 5, 2001, regarding the alllocation of funds for school building. (Requires Adobe's Acrobat Reader.)

Read about Proposition 39, a measure in California to reduce the required vote percentage from two-thirds to 55% to pass a school construction bond issue.

The American Society of Civil Engineers released a report card for 2001 giving schools a D- for facilities and accomodations. The Society gives a summary of the state of schools from the report.

Parents, teachers and students submit their stories about their crumbling schools, posted by the National Education Association, in an attempt to show the need for new schools.

"School Facilities, Profile of School Condition by State," June 20, 1996, is a report from the U.S. General Accounting Office that examines the school facility needs and costs for each state.

PHOTOS: Deborah Bettencourt, the assistant superintendent of California's Folson-Cordova school district, visits a school being constructed without aid from the state because of a change in eligibility rules.
—Steve Yeater
Dennis J. Meade, the schools superintendent in Minford, Ohio, says his district could not have afforded its new high school had the state not picked up most of the tab.
—Scott Osborne

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Some States Help Charter Schools Put a Roof Overhead

By Jessica L. Sandham
Education Week

For the Compass Montessori School in Wheat Ridge, Colo., a new state program that provides direct aid for charter school facilities means the school's leaders can spend more money on instruction and less on paying off the purchase of a converted fruit market.

In the three years since Compass Montessori opened, organizers of the 230-student charter elementary school near Denver have managed to housestudents on a shoestring: buying a vacant farmers' market with an $800,000 bond, using parent volunteers to install wiring and paint walls, and securing tax-exempt status to pay for a recent addition at a lower interest rate.

Now, the burden of their debt payments will be eased by a $5.3 million charter facilities program signed into law in April by Gov. Bill Owens. The program gives charter schools $322 per pupil every year to help offset facilities expenses.

When viewed alongside a proposed federal program for charter facilities and recent steps to address charter schools' building needs in Ohio and Indiana, the Colorado action reflects a growing awareness of one of the biggest challenges charter schools face, said Jeanne Allen, the president of the Center for Education Reform.

"I think the radar is now up on the problem," said Ms. Allen, whose Washington-based organization is a leading advocate of charter schools. "The awareness is key. Charter schools are expected to open and maintain a high degree of accountability, when often they have to cut severely into their operating funds to pay for facilities."

To some educators in regular public schools, giving greater attention to charter operators' housing problems is unwarranted. In light of the overwhelming facilities needs of many regular schools, they say, states have more pressing priorities to address.

Thirty-four states and the District of Columbia have active charter programs. Of them, only eight—Arizona, Minnesota, Massachusetts, Florida, Utah, New York, the District of Columbia, and now, Colorado—have programs that provide direct funding for capital expenses through grants or per-pupil allocations.

Meanwhile, charter operators currently have little access to funds for facilities at the federal level. Granted, that may be changing: President Bush has proposed creating a $175 million program to help offset charters' facilities costs. ("Bush's Growing Education Budget Has

Winners, Losers," April 18, 2001.) And the U.S. Senate voted last week to approve $525 million in various grants to help charter schools pay for facilities and other start-up costs as a part of the reauthorization of the primary federal K-12 education law.

Yet despite the prospect of greater federal aid, charter school advocates are still looking to states for help. As a result, demands to provide facilities funding for charter schools are playing a secondary but still significant role in pushing some states to become more directly involved in helping to build, remodel, and maintain schools.

New Life for Bowling Alleys

As matters stand, charter school operators often get by with less money for capital costs by setting up shop in buildings such as the market used by the Compass Montessori School, as well as strip malls, vacant churches, or other makeshift structures, said James W. Griffin, the executive director of the Colorado League of Charter Schools.

"You dress it up, and it's amazing what you can do with an old bowling alley," Mr. Griffin said.

But even as charter operators struggle to create learning environments in buildings that weren't designed to be schools, they face a bigger challenge in trying to stretch their budgets to cover facilities costs along with regular operating expenses.

Before the recent passage of the state charter-facilities aid program, Colorado charter schools were devoting between 10 and 15 percent of their operating budgets to facilities, Mr. Griffin said. "It's hard to make the case that this was a fair system," he argued. "Not only are they in marginal facilities, but they're also saddled with having to spend a big portion of their budgets to pay for it."

In addition to earmarking per-pupil money for charter facilities, Colorado lawmakers approved a more controversial measure that would require that charter schools be given a chance to participate in the bond issues of their local school districts. Faced with heavy opposition from education groups such as the Colorado School Boards Association, which argued that inclusion of charter schools in bond issues would jeopardize their passage in some districts, the legislature agreed to postpone the implementation of the bond-issue requirement until November of next year.

Charter schools may face unique challenges when it comes to paying for facilities, said Jane W. Urschel, the associate executive director of the state school boards' association, but that's a part of the bargain they strike to get more flexibility than traditional public schools have.

"That's the trade-off they make for having other freedoms," Ms. Urschel said. "The term charter school carries with it a certain status that offers waivers from other school laws."

Set Up for Failure?

In authorizing a new charter law in Indiana this spring, Hoosier State lawmakers also permitted local school boards to share capital funds with charter schools. The measure will help districts interested in sponsoring charter schools, said Ms. Allen of the Center for Education Reform.

Ultimately, she added, giving charter schools access to the kind of facilities that other students enjoy is a matter of equity.

Lawmakers in the states that haven't addressed charters' facilities needs fail to understand that "these schools are real public schools that should be treated the same way traditional public schools are treated when it comes to money," Ms. Allen said. "Charter school children are no less public school children just because they go to a charter."

In Ohio, charter schools have operated under a law that provided no direct aid for capital expenses and prohibited charter operators from borrowing money beyond one year—a combination that effectively "set many of these schools up for failure," said state Rep. Jon Husted, a Republican.

To provide some relief, the legislature established a $10 million loan fund available to back private loans for buying or renovating charter facilities. In addition, the provision permits charter operators to borrow money for up to 15 years.

Ohio lawmakers also approved a measure that requires districts to give charter schools the first opportunity to buy school buildings that districts no longer want. The law was enacted, its supporters say, to ensure that district officials who are opposed to charter schools don't sabotage such schools' efforts to find space.

Earlier this year, John Maluso Jr., the president of the school board in the 11,000-student Youngstown, Ohio, school system, commented that he would rather let a school building sit empty than sell it to a charter school. Mr. Maluso said he opposes charter schools because he believes they create a separate public school system "that only has to abide by only one half of the education code."

A multischool construction project now under way in Youngstown will likely leave the district with some empty buildings. Now, with the new law requiring districts to give charters first dibs on the buildings they put up for sale, Mr. Maluso said he is not sure what the district will decide to do with the school buildings.

"We may have some needs for them—I don't know," Mr. Maluso said.

PHOTOS: Housed in a former preschool, the Sojourner Charter Middle School in Boulder, Colo., gets by with sinks designed for tots.
—Glen Asakawa/Denver Post

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Town and Country

Education Week

Located 3,700 miles away from downtown Newark, N.J., the Alaskan village of Golovin is as rural a setting as New Jersey's largest city is urban. And the states surrounding the two communities present a contrast that is similarly extreme. With just over one person per square mile, Alaska is the nation's least densely populated state. New Jersey, with a population density 1,000 times greater, is its most crowded.

In many respects, the public schools in the two communities differ as dramatically as the landscapes around them. Yet they have this in common: Compared with the facilities of other school districts in their own states, the schools in Golovin and Newark are at a significant disadvantage.

Determined to close the gaps, representatives of rural school districts in Alaska and urban school systems in New Jersey have taken their complaints about unequal and inadequate facilities to court—and won. Across the country, similar rulings have forced states to re-evaluate their traditionally arm's-length posture toward paying for the construction and renovation of schools.

In the accounts that follow, *Education Week* offers close-up views of the conditions that have propelled such litigation forward in Alaska and New Jersey. In Alaska, rural districts want schools more like those in the cities. In New Jersey, the cities want schools like the suburbs'. In both places, courts have decreed that it is the state's obligation to make things right. Part two of this three-part series includes:

- **"Out in the Cold."** State leaders in Alaska are under court order to improve the condition of schools in the state's far-flung rural villages. The state's response could affect the schools' very survival.
- **"Urban Renewal."** Over the next decade, Newark plans to build 45 new schools and renovate all 30 others. Some see an urban renaissance. Others fear that hopes are too high.
- **"About This Series."**

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Education Week

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Out in the Cold

By Alan Richard
Education Week

Golovin, Alaska

George Lewis, who is 12, has never seen a highway or a tall building. He lives in a little blue house, along his village's short gravel road, on a sandy spit that juts into icy-white Norton Sound, thousands of miles away from the rest of the United States.

State leaders in Alaska are under court order to improve the condition of schools in the state's far-flung rural villages.

His school, located in the heart of a school district the size of Minnesota, isn't falling down. But it's way too small, and it's scattered among four buildings. Travel between them is a nuisance and a danger. The school is unable to offer him the kind of simple amenities he'd get in Anchorage, or most places in the country besides a Native Alaskan village a walrus swim from the Arctic Circle.

BUILDING A NEW ROLE: States and School Facilities

To get to the bathroom, George must leave his classroom and head for another building. Outside, in the winter, it's dark all day. The temperature can drop to 30 degrees below zero, and the blowing snow piles up higher than a stepladder. Slippery steps carved from ice lead into the cafeteria. A warm corridor, or even a covered sidewalk, would be welcome.

To get to lunch, George and his 6th grade classmates might interrupt a classroom of younger children. The cafeteria, no larger than a regular-size classroom, is accessible by two doors, and one of them leads right through a class for elementary-age students. The lunchroom is cramped with the school's copier, two refrigerators, and a wall of gray, beaten shelves lined with a cupboard's worth of food.

To play basketball, which he loves to do, George and his buddies scamper across a gym floor less than half the size of a regular one. A folding metal chair won't fit between the wall and the out-of-bounds line, which means there's no space for anyone to watch a game. Students must travel by airplane to play home basketball games, and for volleyball, elders and mothers with babies sit near the net to avoid being hit.

To make a call or talk with parents, George's principal uses an office measuring 10 feet by 10 feet. He shares this space with his secretary, who uses a desk sized for a child.

"There's just enough room to change your mind," jokes Steve Sammons, the principal in Golovin, who moved here from Montana after his retirement, leaving his family back in the lower 48 for the school year.

No library graces the school in Golovin, known as the Martin L. Olson School. The books are shelved in a classroom that triples as a computer lab. There's a wood shop, but no teacher for the class this year. There's no art, music, dance, or even a full-time physical education teacher for the 55 students in preschool through high school.

All of this is why John A. Davis, a native New Englander now in his second year as the superintendent of the 1,800-student Bering Strait school district, which includes Golovin, wants the state of Alaska to get far more involved in paying for school construction and improving the quality of education for Eskimo children. His district, which reaches the Diomede Islands straddling the Russian border, has said so in a lawsuit brought against the state three years ago by a handful of rural residents and eight rural school districts.

"My overall goal is to see that every child has a reasonably adequate school facility. 'Reasonable' is one that doesn't have a leaky roof, that meets regular fire and safety codes," says Davis.

A former superintendent in the islands of Southwest Alaska, Davis now travels every year from his home in the Bering Strait village of Unalakleet to Juneau, the state capital, where he lobbies for construction money for rural schools. This year, one of his objectives was a new school for Golovin, ranked second-highest on a state's list of schools with the most serious problems. Like Golovin, many of those schools are in places that even few Alaskans have ever visited.

Alaska's struggle to define the state's role in paying for school construction is compounded by the long distances between its communities, and the drastic differences in how its people live. At more than 615,000 square miles, Alaska has barely one person for every square mile—and only 1 percent of the state is inhabited.

But in his fight, Davis has many counterparts across the country— school leaders in largely rural states pushing for construction money, and taking their cases to court. In many respects, Alaska's debate over school facilities resembles those in such places as Kansas, Arkansas, Utah, and Wyoming, which have been pushed by the courts to change how they pay for school buildings. At stake in such fights is often much more than bricks and mortar, or lumber and steel: They are battles for better education, and by extension, community survival.

Hundreds of villages like Golovin are scattered across rural Alaska. From the rolling green mountains above British Columbia, to the remote Aleutian Islands in southwestern Alaska, to the inner slopes that are a focus of national debate over drilling for oil, villages need new buildings or complete renovations.

Many of the schools, including the one in Golovin, still use old federal Bureau of Indian Affairs structures, built in the 1930s, as parts of their campuses. Alaska tried to make up for the poor buildings in 1976 with a $200 million wave of construction stemming from a lawsuit named for a student who sued: Molly Hooch. A wedge-shaped design, with a roof sloping to one side, makes the schools built during that period unmistakable. At first glance, these 25-year-old schools seem to be the most impressive buildings in each village, and many times they are. But they warrant a closer look.

The wooden exterior of the school in Golovin is warped like a toy wagon left out in the rain. Even though it got a fresh coat of paint just last year, the wood isn't treated for harsh winter conditions, says Bob Dickens, who oversees construction and building maintenance for the Bering Strait district.

'There's just enough room to change your mind.'

Steve Sammons, Principal, Martin L. Olson School, Golovin, Alaska

In 1998, the state was sued again on behalf of rural students. In his first ruling in the case two years ago, Superior Court Judge John Reese pulled no punches, calling Alaska's way of paying for rural school buildings clearly discriminatory against Native Alaskans.

The ruling gave Davis, who is the president of the Citizens for the Educational Advancement of Alaska's Children, or CEAAC, the group of rural districts that signed on to the lawsuit, hope for better days ahead. But his hope has not yet been realized.

Gov. Tony Knowles, a Democrat in his second term, responded to the court last year with a plan to spend more than $550 million on rural schools over three years. But the legislature slashed the plan to $198 million, and nearly half the money went toward college buildings and urban schools. About $112 million, enough to build 10 rural schools, including one in the Bering Strait village of Elim, was part of the May 2000 plan.

In March of this year, Judge Reese handed down another stern ruling, warning state lawmakers that if they didn't do more to fix the problem, he'd dictate a solution for them.

The governor proposed a more modest construction plan, equal to the amount lawmakers had agreed to spend the previous year: $198 million. The legislature cut that to $105 million, enough to build four schools and renovate dozens of others, selected from lists of emergency construction needs compiled by the state education department. But the estimated cost of completing all those projects—59 on the construction list and 94 more on the maintenance list—tops half a billion dollars.

Elim is a neighboring village to Golovin, which means it's almost 20 mountain-range miles away. That's an hour's ride by snow machine, the term Alaskans give the vehicles often called snowmobiles elsewhere.

Last year, Elim was one of the fortunate ones: It landed state money for a replacement school to be built next year. But the needs in Elim go beyond the building itself, says Principal Lyn Ferrucci.

Her community and school of 100 students has dealt with the deaths of three children and a staff member in the past year. One boy, a 9th grader who had made Ferrucci a necklace of walrus-tusk ivory that she still wears, died after driving his snow machine into the bay in December. Then, a teaching assistant suffered a brain hemorrhage in February, dying in the school lobby in the principal's arms.

"I need a full-time counselor," Ferrucci says, standing in the same hallway where the woman died. "Our kids need to talk."

Ferrucci and others in the rural schools view the state's response to their construction needs as an indication of broader educational neglect of Alaska Native children.

Officials in the rural schools view the state's response to their construction needs as an indication of broader educational neglect of Alaska Native children.

This year, the school ranked as being in the most dire need of replacement was in a village called Togiak, on Bristol Bay, about 400 miles directly south of Golovin. Principal Lorraine Hashey says her building is dilapidated. "They haven't condemned it yet," she remarks. But her needs are academic, as well: No student from Togiak, she says, has ever completed college.

Third on the state's list, behind Togiak and Golovin, is the school in the Bering Strait village of Koyuk. Its two classroom buildings are connected by a heated hallway, but the preschool is housed in an old metal building outside, says Principal Chuck Connolly. The school is actually sinking, and needs steel braces for support.

The Alaska Department of Education keeps lists of emergency building needs, one for construction projects and another for urgently needed maintenance. As the chairwoman of the state school board, Fairbanks teacher Susan Stitham helps oversee the lists. She watched last year as legislators approved the top six projects on the construction list, then picked others from down the list, even paying for urban projects the department didn't consider a priority. "It's so infuriating," she says.

Why the state hasn't done more to help its rural schools is a touchy subject. Gov. Knowles and others are reluctant to say what Judge Reese concluded clearly in his most recent ruling— that race is a factor.

"The rural funding is political, and has been arbitrary, inadequate, and racially discriminatory," the judge wrote. "As we spend the money available, we cannot spend it on urban, mostly non-Native children first, and then say there is not enough to go around."

Knowles, a former mayor of Anchorage who depended on rural voters to help him win election, is frustrated that the legislature has failed to move faster to address the problems highlighted by the judge. He wants to establish a permanent system for school construction spending that keeps politics out of the mix.

"We are required both constitutionally and morally to offer the same opportunities for the student in rural Alaska as we do for the student in urban Alaska," he says.

He warns that lawmakers who fail to improve rural school conditions might invite more poverty into the cities. "It will migrate to the urban areas, and they will be dealing with a people who are jobless and undereducated," he says. "We pay the price for all of those who don't make the grade."

'You run into problems with people that crave their handout and aren't willing to help themselves.'

State Sen. Gary Wilken

State Sen. Gary Wilken, a Republican, says he represents the views of many urban taxpayers. A towering man who has posted a sign over his office door in Juneau that says, "The Time Is Always Right To Do What's Right," he proposed a bill this year to require some rural villagers to pay property taxes for the first time. If rural residents paid what they could, taxpayers in more populated parts of the state—including his town, Fairbanks, the state's second-largest city—would be willing to invest more in rural schools, he says.

"You run into problems with people that crave their handout and aren't willing to help themselves," Wilken says. "This focuses the spotlight ... on the have-nots so they can become haves."

Wilken says he gets a bum rap as insensitive when he's one of the few legislators to have actually visited some of the remote schools. He and others in Juneau argue that Alaska's budget has become far tighter than it was in prior years. Yet while it's true that the state collects less in oil, timber, and fishing taxes than in years past, others say it's a matter of priorities.

Jerri Nagaruk is a former teacher at Elim who for years now has run a village library there. "We have about 320 people in this village, and I can probably count 30 jobs that are available for those people—if you stretch it," she says of Elim, where her husband is the city manager working to get a job-producing granite quarry opened nearby. "It's not that people aren't willing. It's that we don't have anything to get revenue from."

Not every legislator completely agrees with Wilken. Rep. Peggy Wilson, who is a Republican, lives on the fishing-village island of Wrangell about 200 miles southeast of Juneau where her husband is the superintendent of schools. A former legislator in North Carolina, she argued this year for a change in basic school funding to help rural districts. "When you live out in the middle of nowhere, you realize you can't have everything you want, but you want your kids to have good schools like everybody else," she says.

Sheldon Nagaruk, a teacher at Elim and the brother-in-law of the village librarian, is one of the few Alaska Native educators in all the Bering Strait schools. Most teachers and principals are white. Asked why the state has been slow to repair and replace schools in his region, he responds: "I think I would agree with the judge."

Harry Gamble, a longtime administrator in the state education department who watches the construction list closely, scoffs at legislators' claims about budget shortages. He's not alone in pointing out where the state can find a reservoir of extra money: the Alaska Permanent Fund.

Everyone in the state gets a check each October from that account, built from investments of oil-pipeline taxes. Last year, the fund paid each person in Alaska a dividend of $1,963.84—nearly $8,000 for a family of four. The fund's current balance is $26.6 billion. Even though a constitutional amendment would be required to tap the fund for schools or other purposes, Gamble says: "We've got the money."

Anchorage isn't the capital of Alaska, but it might as well be. With 250,000 residents and a few modest skyscrapers, it is by far the state's largest city. And more than half the state's legislators call the tourist and oil town home.

The atrium of Goldenview Middle School, built three years ago, has one of the best views in Anchorage. Walk inside, and there's a two-story lobby with a picture window, looking across the tops of skinny, green spruce trees to a deep- blue bay. It's breathtaking.

The atrium of Goldenview Middle School, built three years ago, has one of the best views in Anchorage. It's breathtaking.

The school's gym has an indoor running track. Nearby, there's a carpeted room where students eat lunch beside a stage with professional lighting. Each wing of the school has a conference room for teacher planning, and there's a library with skylights and mobile computer labs. Most teachers have personal computers on their desks.

Another of the city's newer schools is Fairview Elementary, a two-story building in one of the city's poorer neighborhoods. In contrast to many schools in Alaska's villages, the school boasts offices for a nurse, a guidance counselor, and a psychologist. In the gym, children have plenty of room to dribble basketballs. "We're working on getting a climbing wall," Principal Lois C. Mance says.

But the city's schools aren't all showplaces. Denali Elementary School in downtown Anchorage was built in 1950, and looks it. Bearing a native name for Mount McKinley, which looms large on the horizon, Denali has no cafeteria, and students carry their meals to their classrooms, says Principal Karen Rigg, who is hoping for a new school within two years.

"You can't expect standards and academics to go up if you've got these crumbling facilities," says Carol Comeau, the superintendent of the 50,000-student Anchorage district.

Last year, her district received nearly $78 million in construction reimbursement from the state. Even though the rural needs are real, she says, the city is booming and needs more classrooms, and the older schools need substantial repairs.

Three weeks before the end of the legislative term, Bering Strait's Superintendent Davis showed up to lobby in Juneau, nearly 1,000 miles away from his wife and two little girls back in Unalakleet. On the last day of the session, Alaska lawmakers approved $105 million for rural school construction, including $29 million for a new school in top-ranked Togiak.

Koyuk, the Bering Strait school that's sinking, will get a new $11.7 million building for all its programs. Shishmaref, another village school in the same district, where apartments for teachers are eroding into the sea, will see an $8.3 million renovation.

"We had hoped for more, but given the comments of some legislators, I am pleased we got anything," Davis says. "It would appear the more level-headed folks are finding their voice in Juneau."

George Lewis and his friends in Golovin will have a new school within two years, worth $9.9 million—but the gym still won't be full size. The state limits how much money can be spent on schools, based on enrollment.

Elsewhere, more than 100 school projects across rural Alaska languish on the state's lists. And a judge is watching.

On the Web

The Alaska Department of Education posts capital projects priority lists as well links to its facilities publications.

Read more about the Bering Strait School District, and take a closer look at the Martin L. Olson School.

In this editorial, "Exam Debate, Test Are Problematic," from the *Anchorage Daily News*, Jan. 8, 2001, Bering Strait Schools Superintendent John A. Davis discusses Alaska's proposed high school exit exam.

"Building America's Schools: State Efforts To Address School Facility Needs," from the National Governors Association, June 20, 2000, examines the wide range of school construction policies being implemented in the states. (Requires Adobe's Acrobat Reader.)

PHOTOS: Steel braces are required to support the unstable foundation of the Koyuk Malemute School in the Alaskan village of Koyuk. The village in the Bering Strait school district would receive a new $11.7 million building under school construction legislation approved by state lawmakers this spring.
Sixth grader George Lewis, at far left, stands with classmate Andrew Bekoalok outside the cluster of buildings that make up their school in Golovin, Alaska. The state legislature has approved money to replace the school, and Principal Steve Sammons, above, is eager to have all his students under one roof.
Amanda Moses, 4, and Thomas Amaktoolik, 5, eat lunch at the Martin L. Olson School in Golovin, Alaska, in a cafeteria filled with stored food.
Bering Strait Superintendent John A. Davis, at far left, walks with the district's buildings chief, Bob Dickens, toward the airstrip in the nearby village of Elim.
—Alan Richard

Offering a striking view of a nearby bay, Goldenview Middle School in Anchorage lives up to its name. Superintendent Carol Comeau, at left, stands in its atrium with Principal Connie Bentler.
— Clark James Mishler

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Urban Renewal

By Robert C. Johnston
Education Week

Newark, N.J.

At the ripe old age of 106, Hawthorne Elementary School is a fitting symbol of the widespread deterioration of this city's public schools.

In January of last year, a three-story, eight-room section of the stately but tired building was declared structurally unsound and was condemned.

Today, wooden braces prop up the shifting, water-damaged ceilings in the condemned wing. Outside, a covered walkway protects pedestrians in case of tumbling debris.

Over the next decade, Newark plans to build 45 new schools and renovate all 30 others. Some see an urban renaissance. Others fear that hopes are too high.

Floors creak as the school's principal, Esther Elliott, tours the vacant area. "I hated to lose this space," she says. In particular, she misses the aquarium that was on the second floor and how it fascinated her students. "If they could just use a bit of money to repair our school," she sighs. "It's long overdue."

She has a point. Though the average school in the city is eight decades old, Newark has built just one new school in the past 10 years.

But all of that is about to change. Over the *next* decade, Newark plans to build 45 new schools and renovate all 30 others. In other words, every school in the 44,000-student system will be overhauled or rebuilt. Most surprising of all, perhaps, is that the work can be done without a dime of local money.

To Elliott's relief, Hawthorne Elementary is soon to be replaced with a brand-new school, complete with a gymnasium, cafeteria, and auditorium— and plenty of room for a new aquarium.

That stunning reversal of fortune is the result of an education lawsuit filed in 1981 known as *Abbott* v. *Burke*. In 1990, the New Jersey Supreme Court ruled in the case that the state's school aid formula was not constitutionally adequate for many of its poorest children. In subsequent rulings, the court repeatedly ordered the state to raise per-pupil spending and set up new educational programs in the 30, mostly urban, districts in the case. The court also established that sound facilities are part of an adequate education, and set a precedent nationally by ordering the state to spend whatever it takes to bring schools in those districts up to par.

With little conclusive research linking better facilities to higher student achievement, experts will be watching New Jersey to see how its investment in buildings pays off academically.

The scope of the victory began unfolding last year when then-Gov. Christine Todd Whitman signed a $8.6 billion school construction plan— $6.5 billion of which will go to *Abbott* districts.

"People like to use money as a benchmark for comparisons," says David Mortimer, the assistant state education commissioner for facilities. "The significance for us is that for the first time, on a statewide basis, attention is being paid and funding provided to improve educational facilities for all children."

Nationally, the *Abbott* decision may be unparalleled in the extent to which it focuses on infrastructure problems in urban districts. Increasingly, however, lawsuits arguing that states have failed to give students equal or adequate educational opportunities are resulting in large windfalls for facilities needs in city schools.

Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico were taken to court specifically over school facilities issues, for example, while Ohio was challenged on broader educational finance questions. The upshot in all those states is that more money is being made available for school facilities in cities. In New York City, meanwhile, a court fight is continuing after a judge ruled last year that the nation's largest school district—including its facilities—are underfunded by the state. The decision is being appealed.

With little conclusive research linking better facilities to higher student achievement, experts will be watching New Jersey to see how its investment in buildings pays off academically. That attention makes Newark schools Superintendent Marion A. Bolden a bit uncomfortable—not because she doubts her students, but because she says some people are missing the point.

"A [newspaper] columnist recently asked why we're investing money when we don't know what the results will be," says Bolden, who was named to her position by the state, which took over the Newark district in 1995. "That's selfish and bigoted. Even if a youngster doesn't reach [academic proficiency], he or she deserves a clean, safe school."

It's not hard to see How a judge concluded in one ruling that the schools in the *Abbott* districts were "crumbling and obsolescent." Hawthorne Elementary is not an isolated case.

Lillian Burke, the principal at Newark's Clinton Avenue Elementary School, avoids the evening weather reports because if rain is in the forecast, she will be robbed of a good night's sleep: "I'll just think about what I have to look forward to the next day."

Her nightmare is the school's leak-prone roof. Until a recent round of repairs, she could be assured that if it rained, water would seep under cracked and dried roofing material, drain through porous ceiling panels, and trickle down the sides of cinder-block walls to flood classrooms and hallways.

She has relocated teachers to dry rooms, thrown out saturated student work, and trashed moldy carpets because of the leaks.

The school's head custodian has a fresh scar from the day he went on the roof during a storm and the heavy metal door to the top of the school blew shut on his right index finger. The blow broke his finger and sliced it so badly that it required 12 stitches.

The 240-student school, which was built in 1969 without classroom windows or playground equipment for the school's youngest children, is going to be replaced. In the meantime, it is at the top of Newark's list for state-approved and -financed emergency repairs that are slated to begin this summer.

"This would not work in an affluent community," Burke says of her school's condition. "The parents would be outraged."

Across town, Speedway Avenue Elementary School also limps along.

Five years ago, the school's antiquated boiler gave out. The rusted relic was not removed from the 84-year-old school. Instead, the district rented a temporary boiler, which sits outside the school in a trailer, cordoned off by a chain-link fence. Two other Newark schools are in the same situation.

The path to New Jersey's school construction boom has been long and contentious—and that journey is not over yet.

The awkward setup uses space needed for other purposes at the schools and can best be described as ugly. The district has even had to power-wash soot produced by the boilers off nearby houses.

To be sure, Speedway Elementary is charming inside. Hallways are lined with student writing, art, and lists of honor students. Every pencil mark or speck of dirt is removed from walls and floors each night.

But the school has no library, no gymnasium, no parking lot, and no playground. What's more, its temperature can't be regulated. Heat is blasted in from the boiler each morning, and then shut off around noon, says Theodore W. Hoover, Speedway Elementary's principal.

Few tears are likely when the wrecking ball comes to the school, which is slated to be replaced. "This is huge," Hoover says of a new school. "The PTA is ecstatic. They've been clamoring for it for years. There's a real need."

In spite of such need, which nobody really denies, the path to New Jersey's school construction boom has been long and contentious—and that journey is not over yet.

The state supreme court ruled in 1990 that New Jersey's school aid formula was unconstitutional, and that the "thorough and efficient education" guaranteed by the state constitution includes adequate facilities.

But it took eight years after the court ruled in the plaintiffs' favor before the court accepted a 1998 plan by the Whitman administration to pay 100 percent of school construction costs in the *Abbott* districts. Two years of legislative wrangling later, and seven months after the court's deadline for breaking ground, Whitman signed the school construction law in July

2000.

To help overcome resistance from suburban lawmakers, $2 billion was earmarked for districts outside the *Abbott* case to cover up to 40 percent of costs on their school projects. That concession has led to questions of fairness, because the wealthier districts can now use the new state aid to subsidize additions—even such relative luxuries as swimming pools—to already superior facilities. But it was seen by many as a political necessity.

"New Jersey is a quintessentially suburban state," notes Assemblyman Leonard Lance, a Republican. "I don't see how any legislation representing only urban districts would have passed."

Still, it is the huge price tag of the court-ordered construction, which many concede is likely to rise, that has left some lawmakers with lingering sticker shock. Assembly Speaker Jack Collins, a Republican, says communities that historically have approved funding to maintain their schools and build new ones may receive the wrong message: "The lesson is, let's not build new schools. Just let them deteriorate until the state comes in and builds them."

Students at Science High School wonder what they could do in a school where there was enough equipment to perform the science experiments described in their textbooks.

Meanwhile, a lawsuit is pending that seeks to stop New Jersey from selling bonds to finance the entire school facilities initiative, on the grounds that voters must first approve the debt. "My view is that the matter should have gone to the people for a vote," says Lance, who made that point during legislative debates. "I don't believe $8.5 billion in bonded indebtedness should be expended without voter approval."

To assuage worries over the enormous program, the legislature divided up the roles that state agencies will play. The New Jersey Department of Education reviews and approves the five-year construction plan for each *Abbott* district—a process that has improved after a cumbersome start, local officials say. Meanwhile, the state's Economic Development Authority has control over the money, and will award and supervise the construction contracts. A special branch has been created in the state attorney general's office to prevent fraud and abuse.

That sometimes leaves local officials in the position of having to explain that they don't control the purse strings. "It's almost comical," says Steven M. Morlino, the executive director of facilities for the Newark schools. "I can't go to a conference without a consultant coming to me as soon as they see Newark on my button. They think I have $1.8 billion in my pocket."

Disagreements persist over some issues—such as whether the state will pay for air conditioning in the new schools. Yet, regardless of who controls the money, officials in the 30 *Abbott* districts feel they're finally getting a remedy to what was described in one of the *Abbott* rulings as "deplorable conditions" that "have a direct and deleterious impact" on children already at risk for educational failure.

David G. Sciarra, the executive director of the Education Law Center in Newark, which represented the *Abbott* plaintiffs, argues that it is time for the legislature to get over the lawsuit and move on.

"This is the opportunity for New Jersey to become a leader in educating poor and urban children," he says. "The most important thing we can do is raise the achievement of these kids, and *Abbott* gives us a chance to do this."

In a converted brewery near Newark's industrial waterfront, students at Science High School already know what they can achieve in an inferior facility.

But they wonder what they could do in a school where there was enough equipment to perform the science experiments described in their textbooks, or where teachers had their own rooms and could be more accessible.

Arlene Bolanos, a senior who plans to study journalism next fall at the city's campus of Rutgers University, recalls her initial visit to Science High: "My first impression was, 'My God, this is a school?'"

Nearly every Science High graduate goes to a four-year college, and many are routinely accepted to top schools. With its selective admissions criteria, Science High rejects about two-thirds of its applicants for each freshman class. The school has produced 16 consecutive state-champion debate teams, and last year was rated as one of the top 75 high schools in the state, according to a *New Jersey Monthly* magazine survey that looked at test scores and college-attendance rates.

Such bragging rights are remarkable considering the physical shape the school is in. The site was opened in 1975 with 80 students as a magnet science program, using the converted brewery as temporary quarters. Today, the school is in the same building, though, and considerably more crowded, with nearly 600 students.

Feeling like a vertical maze, the school is so unappealing that its principal, Christine Taylor, refuses to hold community events there without students present. "As a parent, I would not want my child to come here based on the building," she says. "It serves no useful purpose to hold open house without students. The students' energy is what makes the school."

Some hallways in the school are so narrow that an average-size student can easily touch both sides at once, while 6½-foot ceilings squeeze in other parts of the school. Many of the classrooms are devoid of student work or other decorations because, owing to a shortage of classrooms, most teachers change rooms several times during the day and can't claim any one as their own.

While the third-floor lecture hall is impressive, the school's music students practice in a sliver of a room just a little more than a trombone slide away, creating a melodic distraction during lectures.

Veteran teacher Susan Rocco recalls the day she smacked into a column near her blackboard during a lecture and cut her eye. "I knew I hit the column, but I didn't know I was bleeding until the students told me," she says. Her reaction to the collision typifies the school's can-do attitude: "You just go on."

Clearly, Science High shows what motivated students with good teachers can accomplish.

Still, these students can't help but feel shortchanged. As French teacher Isabel Pontoriero puts it: "I'm glad everyone has a good attitude, because if they didn't, it wouldn't work. But imagine what we could do with a better building."

Studies suggest, however, that there is no guarantee that the Science High students would do any better in a state-of-the-art facility than in the converted brewery.

It's true that researchers have found that student performance tends to lag in inferior buildings, yet they also say that good facilities do not guarantee higher achievement. Indeed, their efforts to link school condition and student achievement are inconclusive at best. ("Bricks and Mortarboards," Dec. 6, 2000.)

With so little concrete evidence to go on, Harold H. Wenglinsky, a research scientist at the Princeton, N.J.-based Educational Testing Service, worries that educators and parents in his state may be placing too much stock on the benefits of better facilities. Wenglinsky's own research compared the scores of 14,000 4th and 8th graders on the National Assessment of Educational Progress with the capital outlays in their school districts. He found no relationship between the two.

"Frankly, expectations are too high," he cautions. "It's not that construction can't have a positive effect on how students do in school. But it can do so if it's in the service of overall strategy."

On the other hand, he says New Jersey could become a national laboratory for gauging the influence of school facilities on achievement. "In the case of New Jersey, it's extremely important to evaluate the results of the construction," Wenglinsky says.

New Jersey could become a national laboratory for gauging the influence of school facilities on achievement.

For his part, Sciarra of the Education Law Center notes that the spending on facilities that New Jersey's court ordered is indeed part of a broader strategy, as Wenglinsky advocates.

The court ordered that per-pupil spending in the *Abbott* districts be made equal to that of wealthy suburbs, which will amount to $9,700 per student in the 2001-02 school year. "No one can say our urban schools are not adequately funded for regular education programs, because they are," Sciarra says. "It's a tremendous accomplishment."

In addition, the state is phasing in preschool programs and all-day kindergarten for all of the *Abbott* districts, and monitoring schoolwide improvement strategies in each *Abbott* district. "*Abbott* is about closing the achievement gap, not just about adequate funding or preschool, but closing gaps," Sciarra continues. "Now the question for teachers, principals, and educators is: Are you going to step up to the plate and close these gaps?"

On the Web

Read the New Jersey Supreme Court's decision in *Abbot v. Burke*.

Read the "Newark Public Schools Five-Year Facilities Management Plan," Dec. 15, 1999, from Newark Public

Schools. (Requires Adobe's Acrobat Reader.)

The National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities provides a wealth of links on capital improvement programs.

"School Size, Poverty, and Student Achievement," February 2000, from the Rural School and Community Trust. The report argues that "smaller schools reduce the effects of poverty on student achievement and help students from less affluent communities narrow the achievement gap between them and students from wealthier communities."

"Modernizing Our Schools: What Will It Cost?," from the National Education Association. The NEA gives a 50-state estimate of the need for school modernization along with recommendations. (Requires Adobe's Acrobat Reader.)

PHOTOS: Adamu S. Braimah Sr., the principal of Newark's E. Alma Flagg School, says student discipline deteriorated after he had to close a damaged section of the playground.
—Robert C. Johnston

Students at Newark's Science High School, housed in a building that was once a brewery, navigate a narrow corridor en route to class.
—Justin Lane

Principal Esther Elliott stands under a covered walkway that protects passersby from any debris that may fall from a condemned wing of Hawthorne Elementary School in Newark.
—Robert C. Johnston

At Science High School in Newark, a chemistry teacher's desk is propped up by books. Lawyer David G. Sciarra, at left, has fought in court for more state funds to help urban schools put such conditions behind them.
—Justin Lane

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Education Week

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Capitol Expenditures

By Jessica L. Sandham
Education Week

This past September, students in Superior, Ariz., finally moved into a school building worthy of its name. Thanks to aid from the state, the new Superior Junior-Senior High School has plush carpeting, functional plumbing, and a roof that doesn't leak.

The ranch-style stucco building, located at the base of the Superstition Mountains, is no Taj Mahal, but its amenities are a far cry from the old high school in the former copper-mining town some 60 miles east of Phoenix. For years, students and staff members tolerated drooping ceiling tiles, faulty wiring, and pipes so rusty that a simple turn of a wrench would split them in two. The community simply couldn't do anything about the 80-year-old building without outside help.

That help finally arrived after a 1998 state supreme court ruling compelled the legislature to take the burden of paying for school buildings off the backs of local taxpayers and place it almost entirely on the shoulders of the state. In so doing, Arizona became one of a growing number of states that have been forced—by litigation, school crowding, or the sheer need to meet modern educational demands—to play an expanded role in local school construction and repair.

Traditionally, most states joined Arizona in considering the construction and renovation of schools a local responsibility. It's an approach that some experts say has contributed to a national school facilities problem of crisis proportions.

"The problem has really grown out of a lack of state responsibility over a long period of time," said Richard G. Salmon, a professor of educational leadership and policy studies at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Va. "It's hard to understand why states determined they had no role and left it to localities, when poor localities never really had the ability to build schools very well."

At a national level, the extent to which states' historically hands- off stance has changed is hard to gauge with precision. No comprehensive data are available on just how large a piece of the growing school construction pie is being paid for by states. But the evidence points to an expanding state role.

From 1994 to 1998, for example, the number of bills passed by state legislatures related to capital-outlay funding more than tripled, from 18 to 60, according to a December 2000 report in the journal *School Business Affairs*. Education-related bills tied to tax bases and taxation—some of which dealt with tax revenues specific to facilities funding—jumped

from 13 in 1994 to 85 in 1998. And from 1993 to 1999, nine states—Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Illinois, Kansas, Ohio, Utah, Virginia and Wyoming—made significant changes to their school construction finance systems that moved them toward more equalized funding, the magazine reported.

In addition to those states, lawmakers in such places as California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Texas have come forward in the last five years with more money—often much more—to help districts address their facilities problems.

In Maryland, for example, Gov. Parris N. Glendening approved plans last month to add almost $100 million to the state's school construction program for fiscal 2002, bringing total state spending on the program to almost $1.5 billion since the governor took office in 1995. At the time, Mr. Glendening set a goal of pumping $1.6 billion into school facilities over the course of two terms in office.

Last spring, Iowa Gov. Tom Vilsack signed into law a measure providing $50 million in state aid for school construction over three years—the state's first such direct aid program. Despite such activity, the extent to which states foot the bill for school construction—and the methodology they use to determine the state share—is different in nearly every state.

While states such as Idaho, Nevada, and Minnesota rely predominantly on districts to pay for school repairs and construction, others states have chipped in for decades. An assistance program in Massachusetts that reimburses districts for 50 percent to 90 percent of the cost of school construction, for example, has been in place since 1948. Washington state, meanwhile, has helped pay for schools through the sale of timber on state lands since it first achieved statehood in 1889.

So as matters stand, the means of paying for facilities vary to a much greater degree from state to state than do the approaches to financing schools' day-to-day operations. Yet some observers predict that states are moving toward not only a larger role in paying for facilities, but also a more uniform approach to that task.

"A lot of the trends that developed in school finance formulas are starting to develop in school capital-finance formulas," said Michael P. Griffith, a policy analyst for the Denver-based Education Commission of the States. "Back in the '70s, the big push for finance changes started with a few court cases, and that's the trend we're seeing now with school construction. We're 30 years behind."

Building Boom

For many local districts, it seems, the trend is coming just in time. The U.S. General Accounting Office issued an influential report in 1995 stating that it would cost $112 billion to bring existing schools throughout the country into good overall condition. The National Education Association nearly tripled that figure a year ago, when it placed a $322 billion price tag on the cost of needed school repairs, construction, and technology. Of that figure, the union estimated that $268.2 billion was needed for construction and repairs alone.

The report estimated that more than one-third of the country's schools needed major repairs or replacement, and that the hefty cost estimate "quantified what our members have been telling us for years—we have a crisis that is worsening by the day." That need has not gone

unnoticed. According to a March 2000 report by the GAO, the investigative arm of Congress, annual construction expenditures for K-12 schools grew by 39 percent from fiscal 1990 to fiscal 1997, while student enrollment increased by only 12 percent during the same period.

And the upward trend in spending continued beyond 1997. According to a February report by the journal *School Planning and Management*, school construction expenditures last year topped those for any other year on record. The study found that for the first time, the $21.2 billion spent on school construction in 2000 amounted to more money in inflationary-adjusted, real dollars than the $4.9 billion spent on school construction in 1974—a year the report identifies as the last high point in construction spending, tied to the baby boom generation.

"We're building and renovating school facilities at a more rapid pace for three reasons," said James W. Guthrie, the director of the Peabody Center for Education Policy at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tenn. "One, there's more kids; two, the courts are increasingly getting engaged in it; and three, the World War II buildings are wearing out."

The building boom has come as researchers are still working to sort out the link between the quality of a school's building and the quality of a student's history essay or math exam. While some studies have found a connection between lower achievement levels and shoddy or noisy facilities, others paint a more muddled picture. Most seem to agree, however, that districts shouldn't expect to see academic gains simply by pumping up their capital-outlay budgets. ("Bricks and Mortarboards," Dec. 6, 2000.)

Nevertheless, states increasingly see better facilities as "a part of the overall vision to try to improve student performance," said Dane Linn, the director of educational policy studies for the National Governors' Association, based in Washington.

"Even in states that haven't traditionally played a role in school facilities, there's an urgency to do something," Mr. Linn said. "It's part of creating an environment that's conducive to learning."

Making the Case

Of all the factors driving states to help districts meet their facilities challenges, none has been a bigger force than litigation.

Whether targeted by lawsuits focused exclusively on school facilities, or by broader education finance suits that incorporated facilities funding, states such as Alabama, Alaska, Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, New Jersey, New Mexico, Ohio, Texas, West Virginia, and Wyoming have all been pushed by lawsuits to re-examine their approaches to facilities funding. School finance litigation tied to facilities has grown in popularity in recent years, in part because it's easy to prove disparities, Mr. Salmon of Virginia Tech said.

"Anybody could look at a building and see that the roof leaks, that it doesn't have good wiring, or that it was built on the cheap," he said. "When you're dealing with bricks and mortar, regardless of the reasons for the inadequate facilities, it's fairly easy to convince a court that there's a problem. And since it's a state system, it's a state problem."

In Arizona, the changes propelled by litigation have been top-down and dramatic. In 1998,

the state adopted a comprehensive school construction program. The change followed a ruling from the state's highest court that directed lawmakers to remedy their capital-finance system—which had been dependent on local property taxes—or risk closure of K-12 public schools. The ruling came out of a lawsuit originally filed in 1991 by a coalition of poor districts in both rural and urban areas. They contended that the state's method of paying for school buildings produced serious disparities and violated the state constitution's requirement for a "general and uniform" public school system.

By the time the Superior district decided to sign on as a plaintiff in the 1991 suit, its decaying high school had already been officially condemned for five years. The mineral-rich water in the old copper-mining community had caused the plumbing to erode over time, and the water pressure was so inadequate that the state water company was forced to hook the school directly to its local pump house so that students and staff members would be able to flush the toilets. The school's roofs leaked so badly that administrators once walked into a new computer lab the day after a rainstorm to find an inch of water on the floor.

"It was just deplorable," said Richard Krempasky, the superintendent of the 650-student school district. "We were constantly fixing things. We'd spent about $2.1 million simply to keep up with repairs, and it was just money down the drain."

Though the community had historically supported bond measures to pay for schools, a state law at the time that capped districts' bonding ability inhibited the school system from replacing the faltering building. Even a successful bond measure in Superior would net a maximum of only $2.3 million—not nearly enough to pay for a new high school.

Elsewhere in the state, there were larger districts where "you simply couldn't get a bond passed if your life depended on it," said Timothy M. Hogan, the executive director of the Arizona Center for Law in the Public Interest, which represented the districts in the court case. "It wouldn't matter if there was no roof on the school."

Protected From Politics

After years of legal wrangling, the Arizona Supreme Court sided with the school districts three years ago. Now, it's as if Arizona has become a governmental earth mover, as it carries out plans for more than $1 billion in new construction projects.

The state now covers nearly all the expenses associated with building a new school, including the cost of land and architectural fees. In addition, millions of dollars are set aside annually, including $130 million for the upcoming 2002 fiscal year, to help districts pay for maintenance of school buildings.

The funding stream is designed to be ongoing and invulnerable to the political ebbs and flows of the legislature. A state school facilities board tells the state treasurer how much money is needed, and the money can be appropriated without legislative approval.

"It's a first lien on the general fund," Mr. Hogan said. "It's a matter of constitutional right to these kids, and the legislature cannot decide not to fund it."

Arizona also recently wrapped up a 16-month initiative in which officials dispatched inspectors to examine every one of the 1,210 public school buildings in Arizona. Having assessed the needs of existing schools, the state is beginning a $1.1 billion effort to address

them.

Voters last November passed an increase in the state sales tax that will pay for the bulk of the projects. The facilities board will oversee the construction work, issue the contracts, and pay all the bills.

Such top-to-bottom state involvement is necessary because districts often don't have the staff or capacity required to oversee major projects, said Philip E. Geiger, the executive director of the Arizona School Facilities Board.

"We do not ignore districts," Mr. Geiger said. "They are partners in the process. But they don't have the obligation of bidding this work out or supervising it."

Centralizing the authority over school projects at the state level has another advantage: cost savings. By lumping together work in several districts rather than bidding it out separately, the state is able to shave money off construction bills.

And while districts had some initial concerns about losing local control, Mr. Geiger says the facilities board has made a concerted effort to keep districts in the loop. A recent "customer satisfaction" survey garnered responses from 91 out of 228 school districts and suggested that districts are predominantly content with the state's efforts. Ninety-six percent reported that the school facilities board had met their expectations, and 95 percent reported that their facilities board liaisons were helpful and responsive.

Mr. Krempasky, for one, says he is just happy to have a spotless school where toilets flush and ceiling tiles don't fall to the floor.

"I take my hat off to the state," Mr. Krempasky said. "They've come to realize what's needed and they're doing something positive about it."

Growth Spurt

Some states have also been pushed by booming student enrollments to immerse themselves more deeply into the facilities funding stream. The U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics reports that an estimated 53 million students filled the nation's public and private K-12 classrooms this school year—marking the fifth straight year of record-setting enrollment.

Fueled by a rise in immigration and the demographic trend known as the "baby boom echo"—the surge in births from baby boomers having children—such steady enrollment increases over the past decade have spurred states such as California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, and Texas to play a more active role in helping their districts accommodate new students.

Illinois has spent $1.4 billion on school facilities since the legislature first approved a state school construction program in 1997. Lawmakers voted last week to approve an additional $740 million for the program, which was created in part as a way to help districts cope with booming enrollments. Georgia also threw its hat into the ring in April, as Gov. Roy E. Barnes signed into law a $468 million state construction initiative. To underscore the need for it, the signing ceremony took place at a 1,240-student suburban Atlanta elementary school that was designed to accommodate 800 students. In addition to experiencing

record-high enrollment growth, Georgia's school facilities crunch is compounded by a new push to lower class sizes.

"No child should have to attend, nor should any teacher have to teach, in a school that is too small," the Democratic governor said at the April 24 signing ceremony.

Alleviating school crowding in Florida, meanwhile, has been a hotly debated topic in the legislature for years. Almost four years after state lawmakers approved a record $2.7 billion to help districts house their students, they debated school construction funding again this spring.

This time, the discourse centered around how to help districts help themselves. Student enrollment in the state has been growing by some 50,000 students every year, making it hard for districts to keep pace with the tide of new students.

Florida's $2.7 billion in construction bonds—which will be paid back over 30 years with state lottery revenue—was important and necessary as a stopgap measure, "but it didn't really solve the problem," said Ruth Melton, the legislative liaison for the Florida School Boards Association.

"That has been difficult for us in the aftermath," Ms. Melton said, noting that various sources estimate that the state still has a need for $10 billion worth of additional spending on school facilities. "Because many legislators don't realize that a tremendous need still exists," she said, "they always point to this special session and say, 'We gave you $3 billion. I thought we were done with this issue.'"

'Screaming for Help'

For the 251,000-student Broward County, Fla., district, the needs are far from met. In the second- fastest-growing school district in the country, next to Clark County, Nev., the challenge is clear from the numbers: 2,000 portable classrooms, and a net gain of roughly 10,000 new students every year.

The district is already taxing its residents at the maximum allowable rate, and the $261 million it received from the 1997 state allotment is already encumbered in past or future construction projects. Still, the district can't build schools fast enough.

"There's got to be a way for us to get beyond screaming for help," said Judie S. Budnick, a Broward County school board member who also served on a recent governor's commission on growth management. "We can't beg, borrow, and steal every legislative session. With or without a lean year, kids needs schools, and there needs to be a seat ready for them when they come to our state."

Florida legislators this spring considered a proposal to require county planning officials to work closely with local school districts when deciding whether to grant permits for new housing developments. That approach was recently put into practice in Orange County, Fla., where county officials have turned down development requests because the county schools didn't have enough space to accommodate new students.

Even though some residential construction has been curtailed, however, Orange County school officials estimate that they still need $1.2 billion to replace aging portable

classrooms and catch up on a backlog of renovation projects—needs that were put on the back burner while the district was still gasping to keep pace with growth.

"It's all well and good to say that you will stop growth until you have the space to keep up with that growth," said Jackie Johnson, a spokeswoman for the 154,000-student Orange County district. "The problem is that we are already in a hole. We have a crisis now, and we need the funding now."

For that reason, groups such as the Florida School Boards Association and the Florida Home Builders Association lobbied state lawmakers this spring to tackle school construction funding alongside growth planning. That's where negotiations between members of the House and the Senate ultimately broke down.

The Senate plan would have empowered Florida school boards to raise local-option sales taxes by up to 1 cent without voter approval, while House lawmakers wanted to require a voter referendum to approve any increases. Legislators also disagreed on whether to force municipalities to deny new development if there was insufficient space in schools.

Time Runs Out

Gov. Jeb Bush, for his part, opposed the financing provisions in the Senate plan because he believed that it was premature to identify a funding stream, said Lisa Gates, a spokeswoman for the Republican governor.

"He felt it was important to have the county commissioners and school boards work together and know what they were funding before they asked for the money," Ms. Gates said. "Otherwise, it's like throwing money at an unidentified problem."

In the end, the clock ran out on the legislative session before the differences could be resolved.

"We ran out of time," Ms. Budnick said. "Unfortunately, time ran out on kids, too. It's going to be at least another year before we can do anything."

Even as some states are working to keep schools afloat amid a flood of new students, others are finding that schools built for previous generations are simply wearing out.

The National Center for Education Statistics released a report last June based on the results of a representative survey on school facilities conditions given to 903 elementary and secondary schools. The center revealed that one in four schools had reported having at least one building in "less than adequate" condition. A much greater proportion, 76 percent, reported that they would have to spend some money on repairs, renovations, or modernization to bring their schools into good overall condition.

Part of the problem is that many districts have been forced to continue using buildings constructed quickly and sloppily during the baby boom era, said David S. Honeyman, the director of the Center for Education Finance at the University of Florida in Gainesville. "The worst buildings were built in the late '50s and early '60s, with flat-roof construction," Mr. Honeyman said. "They built these buildings thinking it would be the end of the boom—they had a 20-year useful life. Now we have boomlets, and they have to put these kids someplace, so districts are stuck with these buildings."

In New York state, where the average school is about 50 years old and roughly 1,000 schools were built before World War II, lawmakers voted in 1998 to increase the rate at which the state reimburses districts for needed school construction by 10 percentage points. The state has long earmarked money for school projects based on a district's wealth; richer districts might receive only a 10 percent reimbursement of capital costs, for instance, while poorer ones might receive as much as 90 percent.

With the state agreeing to boost its contribution to facilities costs, districts began to pass a flurry of new bonds—from $393 million worth in 1998 to $2.6 billion in 1999 and $3.6 billion last year. State spending, meanwhile, has almost tripled, from $601 million in fiscal 1997 to roughly $1.75 billion in fiscal 2001.

Need To Modernize

Empire State lawmakers were compelled to address the condition of the state's school buildings not only because of their age and disrepair, but also because they were ill-equipped to handle modern technological and educational needs, said Alan Ray, a spokesman for the state education department.

"There was a general need for renovation and new technology," Mr. Ray said. "At the same time, the board of regents pushed an aggressive increase in learning standards, so districts were finding the need to upgrade their facilities to meet those higher standards."

In the 800-student Afton school district in rural Chenango County, N.Y., officials seized on the new state aid as an opportunity to modernize their one, K-12 school that was originally built in 1908, when Theodore Roosevelt was president. A patchwork of 1920s, '60s, and '90s-era additions to the original structure, the building's current renovations are driven by "what's going on in the world today," said Superintendent Vernice N. Church.

Because of a new state standard that requires high school students to spend more hours in science laboratories, the district is adding a science lab, as well as two technology labs. The $16.2 million project will also include a media center and an auditorium designed to satisfy new state requirements in the arts, drama, and media literacy. In addition, the project will include a new gymnasium to replace one that is so small that, when bleachers are pulled out during basketball games, "people in the first row have their knees practically in the court," Ms. Church said.

But the response by local districts has caused a bottleneck in the processing of state aid, which has delayed funding for the Afton project and others. Gov. George E. Pataki, a Republican, this year proposed capping the amount the state would spend and doling out the money on a competitive basis. While the governor's proposal appears to lack legislative support, some observers say the state is still trying to get its hands around a program that proved more popular than expected.

"New York has gone a long way to providing districts with habitable structures that are amenable to helping districts meet higher academic standards," said David Ernst, a spokesman for the New York State School Boards Association. "We say thank you, but we certainly don't apologize, given that the crush of projects represents an enormous pent-up demand."

On the Web

"Building America's Schools: State Efforts to Address School Facility Needs," from the National Governors Association, June 20, 2000, examines the wide range of school construction policies being implemented in the states. (Requires Adobe's Acrobat Reader.)

Learn about federal assistance for school repairs through Urgent School Renovation Grants, authorized under the IDEA, from the Department of Education.

"School Construction and Design," April 2000, posted by The Council of Educational Facility Planners. Former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley addresses the problem of school building deterioration in the United States and lists three conditions necessary for designing new schools. Requires Adobe's Acrobat Reader.)

The National Clearinghouse for Educational Facilities offers a list of financing options for school construction.

School Planning and Management magazine addresses issues such as school construction, facilities, and management. Its report, "2001 Construction Report," finds that school construction expenditures last year topped those for any other year on record.

PHOTOS: Workers prepare to resurface an elementary school's ceiling in Scottsdale, Ariz.
—Suzanne Starr/The Arizona Republic
Surrounded by lumber signed by students and parents, Jane Gallucci, the president of the Florida School Boards Association, calls in March for more state facilities funding.
—Colin Hackley/Tampa Tribune
Using state and local funds, New York City recently replaced the last of its schools' coal-fired furnaces, including this one at IS 119 in Queens.
—Benjamin Tice Smith

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Side-by-Side States Are Far Apart In Funding for Facilities

By Jessica L. Sandham
Education Week

Deer Park, Wash.

School district leaders in this small, eastern Washington town have an enviable dilemma. The state recently promised to give them $4.3 million to cover roughly half the cost of a new elementary school—an allocation that surpassed by more than $1 million the amount the district was expecting to receive.

Now the local officials must decide what to do with the windfall: Do they use it for other capital projects? Or do they send the difference back to Deer Park taxpayers? Across the border in Idaho, school officials could scarcely hope to be faced with such a problem. In a state where districts must muster a two-thirds majority to pass local school bonds, and the state offers next to nothing in the way of aid for school construction, districts have been forced to postpone school projects for years—even after the structural safety of their facilities becomes a pressing concern.

When Idaho districts do build schools, they're typically confined to much tighter budgets. And with local taxpayers footing the whole bill, there's just no room for extras.

Researchers aiming to determine how the state role in school construction affects local districts need look no farther than these two neighboring states.

The Evergreen State has a history of chipping in to build schools that dates back to 1889, the year Washington achieved statehood and its founding fathers set aside a portion of revenues from the sale of timber on state land to help build schools. As timber revenues have dwindled in recent decades, state lawmakers have dipped into the general fund to help finance the state's share of school projects.

In the Gem State, meanwhile, districts have always been responsible for paying the construction costs for their own school buildings—even in rural areas where limited tax bases make it hard for local communities to shoulder the entire cost of new schools.

"Idaho schools are far more cost-conscious and utilitarian as a consequence," said Steven J. McNutt, a Spokane-based architect familiar with school projects in both states. "It's not to say they're bad schools, they just have leaner budgets. More people have to be satisfied with the status quo."

Condemned To Making Do

School officials in Wendell were among those Idahoans content to maintain the status quo—until February of last year, when the district's middle school building was condemned.Taxpayers in the tiny dairy-farming community two hours east of Boise were still paying off the debt on the bond they passed in 1992 to build a new high school, and district leaders were hesitant to ask them to dig deeper into their pocketbooks to support a new middle school. The 85-year-old brick building had its share of imperfections, they knew, but they would just have to make do.

All of that changed when a structural engineer was hired to determine if the building could support a new elevator, and samples taken from the building's foundation crumbled into pieces. The building was declared unfit for occupancy and boarded up—leaving school officials scrambling to find new accommodations. Students finished out the academic year using a split schedule at the high school: Middle school students attended classes on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays, while the high schoolers came on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.

This school year, the juggling act continues. A third of the district's 225 middle school students are bused 10 miles to open classroom space at a state school for deaf and blind students, while the others are shoehorned into a combination of portable classrooms and outbuildings behind the condemned school. With no space for lockers—and their old blue-metal lockers standing empty in the deserted building—students get by with bulging backpacks and a second set of textbooks for use at home.

Staff members are piled into shared office space.

"But our window view is beautiful," Principal Marcia Hallett said wryly during a tour of the tiny office she shares with the district's maintenance supervisor. "We look out on the old boarded-up building."

Despite such circumstances, and even with majority support from local voters, officials of the 1,150-student district fell short last October in their quest for a bond to build a new middle school. Sixty-one percent of those going to the polls said yes—not enough to surpass the two-thirds required to pass a bond under state law.

"It's not a matter of people not seeing the need for a new school," said Superintendent Larry R. Manly, noting that the area's farmers are likely feeling economically pinched by a recent drought. "It's a matter of who is providing the dollars for school construction."

Some Help Coming

While Wendell's dilemma may seem especially acute, it is hardly the only district in Idaho struggling with facilities issues. Donald P. Hutchison, a Boise-based architect, says that "a large percentage" of rural schools in Idaho are old and potentially unsafe.

"Everyone knows these buildings are unsafe," Mr. Hutchison said. "But nobody has the guts to go in there and condemn them the way these guys [in Wendell] did. That's the only way they're unique."

When structurally unsound buildings are left unchecked and unmended, the architect added,

the situation could be grim in the event of an earthquake. "When the foundation goes down, the entire building goes down," Mr. Hutchison said. "It's just like a sand castle." Idaho leaders were forced to grapple with such safety concerns this past legislative session, following a state district court judge's February ruling that the system of paying for school construction failed to satisfy a constitutional requirement that guarantees students access to a "safe environment conducive to learning."

In response, the legislature approved a $10 million program that subsidizes the interest on construction financing garnered through low-interest, health-and-safety loans made by commercial banks to public school districts.

Wendell netted approximately $1.5 million in state interest subsidies through the program—enough to persuade 71 percent of the district's voters to approve a $4.6 million levy for a new middle school in another vote last month.

While all's well that ends well in Wendell, some state leaders maintain that in a year in which lawmakers had a $300 million budget surplus to work with—and sent $111 million back to taxpayers in rebates—the $10 million worth of subsidies amounts to too little, too late.

"This basically helped districts that had the most severe problems," said Rep. Wendy Jaquet, a Democrat whose legislative district includes Wendell. "I was willing to vote for it, but it's certainly not enough."

But many Idaho legislators maintain that school construction funding, except in circumstances of extreme hardship, is still best left up to local communities. If the state started buying school buildings for districts, they say, it would make district officials less accountable to local voters.

"You've got to have some kind of accountability, and that's where it comes from," said Speaker of the House Bruce Newcomb, a Republican. "It comes from the local folks. If you left it up to most superintendents, they'd prefer to build a Cadillac of a school, when the kids' needs could be met with a good, old-fashioned Ford or Chevy."

Getting Ahead

In the 2,000-student Deer Park district in Washington state, meanwhile, access to significant state funding means that school leaders will be able to replace a cramped, 60-year-old elementary school well before the structural safety of the building becomes a concern.

In recent years, school officials have made cosmetic touch-ups to the classic brick schoolhouse with a white steeple, putting on a fresh layer of paint and installing new carpeting. There are ample signs, though, that the student population has already outgrown the building: Two portable classrooms sit outside, a gym doubles as a cafeteria that doubles as an auditorium, and a nurse's office is crowded with reams of colorful paper and other art supplies.

In addition, the building has poor insulation, an inefficient heating system, and a wing added in the 1970s that includes a distracting "open classroom" layout, said Steven Howard, the school facilities manager in this fiscally conservative farming and logging community 15 miles north of Spokane.

On the plus side, Mr. Howard notes, the roof doesn't leak and the structural integrity of the building is sound. With the state picking up roughly half the $8.5 million cost of a new elementary school, "we haven't had to resort to scare tactics or imply that it's an unsafe building in order to get support for its replacement," Mr. Howard said.

School officials in the nearby Central Valley district are also using state money to get ahead of their construction needs—but on a much larger scale. The 11,000-student district recently passed a $78 million bond issue to simultaneously replace its two high schools built four years apart in the late 1950s.

Though the district has decided to "front fund" the massive construction project with its local bond revenues rather than depend on state aid, it will receive a $23 million reimbursement from the state to offset the total cost of the construction project. That money, in turn, will be used to pay for needed renovations at four elementary and two middle schools.

"We would have had to go for another bond issue to do these other school sites," said Superintendent R. Wallace Stanley. "We would not be able to do the other work without the state funding."

Still, education officials say, Washington state's school construction program is far from perfect.

Its critics complain that the state- reimbursement formula underestimates the amount of square footage per student that is needed in a modern school. In addition, the state's practice of awarding school construction money in July means that districts sometimes have to delay breaking ground on projects as they wait for the check to arrive from Olympia.

But perhaps districts' biggest gripe is that in order to gain access to any state construction aid, they must first get approval for the local share.

In the 16,000-student Bethel district, 10 miles south of Spokane, district leaders unsuccessfully attempted eight bond issues between 1993 and 2000 to accommodate growing enrollment. The district finally passed a $84 million bond issue for new schools this past February, but facilities director Jay Reiffel says the delay has taken its toll.

"When you don't pass a bond, you just get more and more crowded," Mr. Reiffel said. "You have to take more and more drastic measures to accommodate the crush of students."

Regardless of its flaws, the continued access to state aid in Washington state means that there is less "pent-up need" for school construction projects than in Idaho, said Jim Christensen, an architect with Architects West, a firm based in Coeur d'Alene, Idaho.

"Washington is more likely to keep pace," Mr. Christensen said. "Whereas Idaho more continually falls behind."

'Riding in Style'

Though the Central Valley construction sites in Washington state still consist of little more than the steel-beam skeletons of future schools, it is already clear that they will come fully

stacked with something that even newer Idaho schools tend to do without: amenities.

Each of the Central Valley high schools is designed to accommodate 1,600 students, and each will have separate weight, gymnastics, and wrestling rooms, in addition to one main gymnasium and two "practice" gyms. Each will have red-brick exteriors, windows throughout, and a state-of-the-art performing arts center that will eliminate the need to travel to the Spokane Opera House for student performances.

The current $40 million renovation of the historic 90-year-old Lewis and Clark High School building in downtown Spokane also includes some plusher features, some of which Mr. McNutt, the Spokane architect, speculates were made possible in part because the state kicked in $13 million for the project.

At Lewis and Clark, a large pipe organ has been reconstructed and restored in an auditorium that also includes a new, computerized sound-and-light system. The school's original terrazzo floors were replaced with tile made of Italian marble. The entry to a new gym complex includes a 45-foot-high atrium.

Mr. McNutt concedes that such spaces are more "qualitative" than they are functional. But he says a good school environment can make a positive contribution to a student's overall educational experience.

"You could probably get a positive experience in a cave with the right set of teachers," Mr. McNutt said. "But I think a better-quality school is perceived at a conscious or subconscious level by the kids. They appreciate the educational environment more because of it."

Even in those Idaho districts that can afford to support new school construction, local architects report that schools loaded with such "extras" are less common than they are in Washington state. And there's less work to go around, the architects say.

Because of the financial limitations faced by Idaho districts in building new schools, Mr. McNutt's firm, Northwest Architectural Company, tends to do more work in its home state of Washington.

"We have a portfolio of Washington quality schools that they can't afford," Mr. McNutt said of Idaho districts. "They are reluctant to hire an architect who doesn't have a portfolio of schools that shows they can stretch the dollar farther."

Mr. Christensen, the Coeur d'Alene architect, agrees that tighter budgets often translate into fewer "architectural niceties" in Idaho schools.

At the new 1,200-student high school that opened this past fall near the Washington border in Post Falls, Idaho, for example, the exterior of the building is concrete block, which is cheaper than a brick surface. Likewise, vinyl tile paves the hallways, rather than more expensive stone tile or carpeting, and the school has just one gymnasium, with an attached mezzanine that can be used for various athletic activities.

School officials opted to build a "commons" area with fold-out bleachers rather than a more expensive auditorium. Architects designed the building in such a way that an auditorium can be added later, but school officials didn't want to add any more than necessary to the $18 million bond issue they asked voters in the 4,400-student district to pass.

As it turned out, they knew the fiscal limits of their community well: Voters passed the bond for the new high school with exactly a two-thirds majority. If there had been one fewer affirmative vote among the 5,487 total votes cast, the school would not have been approved.

In the end, though, the budgetary trade-offs Post Falls school leaders made to build an affordable school influence aesthetics much more than they affect educators' abilities to provide high-quality academic programs within school walls, Mr. Christensen said.

"It's like comparing a Chevrolet to a Buick, or in some cases, a Chevrolet to a Cadillac," Mr. Christensen said, picking an analogy often used in such discussions. "They both get you down the road fine, but in one case, you're riding in style."

PHOTOS: Larry R. Manly, the superintendent of the Wendell school district in Idaho, has struggled to accommodate students who were displaced when the community's middle school was condemned early last year.
—Doug Gasgill
In renovating Lewis and Clark High School, officials in Spokane, Wash., have been able to afford the extras.
—Pat Higgins

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